

Women doing their own thing:

Our picture of modern women at work?

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The choice is yours?

- Preference Theory: **Women's employment choices are shaped by lifestyle preferences** (Hakim)
 - e.g. preference for a combination of childcare and paid employment rather than full-time career
- **But: such choices are subject to constraints** (Crompton & Lyonette 2005, Blackburn et al. 2002)
 - e.g. education, family situation/support, class, wealth
- Practice theory/this study (Bourdieu 1984):
 - Large parts of work & employment preferences and constraints can be understood by looking at lifestyles
 - Lifestyle is influenced by a person's position in society and perceptions, tastes and resources typical for that position
 - close link between work & employment and lifestyle requires closer look at lifestyle

Women's work and media

- Lifestyle preferences are shaped by media discourse
e.g. ideas for consumption, careers, life scripts
- Up to 1950s/60s: 'happy housewives' (Friedman 1963)
- Women's lifestyle centred on consumption (Ballaster et al. 1991)
- By 1980s, paid work outside the home had slowly made its way into women's magazines
e.g. columns in *Bella* and *Best*, 'Career Ahead' (*Cosmopolitan*)
- But: little change in gender images since 1970s, media dominate by
"highly restricted (for which read patriarchal) versions of 'acceptable' femininity" (Byerly & Ross 2006:50)

eve Magazine's readers (eve media info)

- ...intelligent, independent and stylish women in their 30s...
 - ... well educated, aspirational and demanding of themselves
 - ... interested in personal development and an increasingly broad range of experiences.
 - ... with time pressures and busy lifestyles
 - ... for whom 'time for me' and 'treats for me' are essential rewards for their efforts and commitment"
- average household income of £46.300 (A\$100.000)

Women doing their own thing

- Central monthly feature
- Reports on women who leave employment to set up own business
- Consists of main article plus 3 smaller columns
 - “My five best decisions”
 - “Could you do it?”
 - “We did it, too”



Method of study

- Qualitative content analysis of 17 articles
- editorial decision about inclusion or omission of aspects from available narratives is purposeful shaping of texts
- Aim: to unveil underlying themes, perceptions and meanings of text (Bryman 2004)
- Inductive coding process with 5 code families
 - Personal information: age, ethnicity, marital & family status
 - Career change: e.g. previous occupations & qualifications, new occupation/business, new qualification requirements
 - New business: e.g. product, industry, amount & source of start-up capital, formal & informal support, # employees
 - Work: e.g. type of work, working hours, work location, work attitudes, good & bad work experiences
 - Perceived changes, e.g. in lifestyle or work-life balance
 - indicative language & undercurrents

The protagonists of WDTOT



- 18 protagonists:
 - 32-46 years old, average 35 years
 - 13 married, 2 divorced, 3 no information
 - 10 had children (2.2 on average)
 - All 18 women were white-British
- Former occupations: PR, marketing & sales, conference organisers, interior designer, business consultant, corporate lawyer, client manager in bank, teacher, assistant in film, office worker
 - ⇒ New professions that will have required qualifications/ degrees and offered career progression and good wages
 - ⇒ Described as leaving women feeling "guilty", "frustrated", "bored", "jaded", "soulless ... starved and stifled", and "stagnant" and as "rat-race" in "grey, corporate offices"

Motivation to “do your own thing”

- “What if you could swap the mania of rush hour for quietly strolling round bejewelled stores filled with swathes of shimmering fabric? Imagine being able to wave goodbye to grey, corporate offices and jet off to Milan, Barcelona and New York instead!”
- “Why can’t your life be more like that - a bit less *Changing Rooms*, a bit more like *Chocolat*?”
- “Picture a job where finding the right dark chocolate is crucial to the company’s share price.”
- “How do you make an eco-friendly fortune while living in one of the most beautiful places on earth?”

The new businesses

- **New businesses:** handbags, organic shampoo, cheese, lavender crafts, French furniture, toys, flowers, bakery, cooking school, holidays/hospitality, property developer, doula, painter, wedding planner



- ⇒ Low investment businesses allowing protagonists
 - to start their new venture from home or to turn their home into their business location
 - to work with external contract partners (laboratories, factories, wholesalers) rather than with employees
 - to produce to demand
 - to start their business by moonlighting

Setting up the new businesses

Setting up a new business is portrayed as requiring no qualifications or skills:

“you don’t need an earth-shattering invention to start a new business”

“the 40-year old mum has not one single formal qualification in business or catering”

“She had the creative flair - so what if she lacked the scientific expertise?”

“the most useful technique I learned was to go to offices at the highest levels and burst into tears!”

“I made a few phone calls and persuaded the makers to let me sell [the product] ... that was that; I had my own business”

⇒ suggests successful entrepreneurship requires only (female) intuition and enthusiasm

Resourcing the new businesses

- Amount of start-up capital:
 - £70 - £48.000, average £22.930
 - Information on size and nature of businesses portrayed suggest that real costs must have been higher
 - Sources of start-up capital:
 - Savings (8x), husband or family (4x), mortgages (3x), overdrafts (2x) or combinations thereof
 - Only one protagonist is reported to have written a business plan and negotiate with the bank
- ⇒ suggests editorial decision to downplay costs and emphasise accessibility of start-up capital

WDTOT's portrait of work - I

- Strong emphasis on traditional products and work traditionally undertaken by females
e.g. cooking, baking, entertaining, hosting, decorating, designing or helping others
- Emphasis on work undertaken in domestic locations
 - “the hub of their working life is Lucy's big kitchen table [where] many of their beautiful handbag ideas are born, fuelled by tea and biscuits”
 - “my heart was always at home at our old farmhouse in the Hampshire countryside”
 - “working from home means I'm always around for the family. It's brought me back to my roots”



WDTOT's portrait of work - II

- Emphasis on other-centred work and emotionality

"I love thinking up little ways to surprise and delight my customers"

"her food makes [customers] feel happy, it's like a hug"

"The only thing you don't do for them is make love"

- While old jobs were "zapping [my] natural get-up-and-go", new work is depicted as liberating and energising

"Anna rediscovered her joi de vivre"

"I have constant sparks of energy and I'm much more creative [...] even the chores are exciting"

"my job doesn't feel like work"

"I feel 100% fulfilled"



Summary: Work & business in WDTOT

- Setting up one's own business is...
 - ... more attractive than a professional career in an office
 - ... possible: low start-up costs/risk, accessible start-up capital
- New business can provide work that "doesn't feel like work", but helps reclaim one's "true nature" ("baking *did* come naturally")
- Successful work/life-balance is most likely in traditionally female, other-centred work
- ⇒ WDTOT presents re-interpretation of 1950s housewife: retreat to domestic spaces and traditional roles, but with independent income from this position
- ⇒ WDTOT focuses on choice and preferences (Hakim)

Critical analysis of omissions

“Women doing their own thing” ...

... praises independent female entrepreneurs but protagonists are clearly dependent on family/partners

... is silent on foregone career-investment (education or industry- or company-specific social capital) and future employability

... focuses on achieving a lifestyle, not business success

... doesn't discuss the potential precariousness of an amalgamation of work and life (work never ends)

⇒ WDTOT doesn't discuss constraints...

... of setting up new businesses

... of leading the entrepreneurial lifestyle portrayed

Women's business ownership (Carter & Shaw 2006)

- Women-owned businesses...
 - ... start with lower levels of overall capitalization, lower ratios of debt-finance and are less likely to use private equity or venture capital
 - ... have a start-up capitalization that is, on average, one third of that used by male-owned businesses
 - ... tend to have less annual turnover and employees
 - ... tend to be smaller, more easily managed from home and exploiting temporal flexibility
 - ... use the home as a business base more often than male-owned businesses

Women's business performance (Carter & Shaw 2006)

- Under-capitalization negatively affects subsequent business performance
 - Women-owned businesses seem to be disadvantaged in their access to various entrepreneurial capitals sourced via (previous) employment, contacts and networks
 - Business input/output ratios show no performance differences between male- and female owned businesses
i.e. female entrepreneurs don't lack competence, but initial resources
- ⇒ Picture WDTOT paints of women-owned businesses is likely to perpetuate rather than change this situation

Current themes in women's work

- Mixed evidence on women “opting out” (Stone 2007)
 - 28% of white, college-educated female professionals who are 30-54 years old and married with children are at home (US)
 - increased (media) attention for “Kate Reddy”-cases: women...
 - ... whose real love for their profession is “dwarfed by maelstrom of bad behaviour resulting from corporate pressure, competition and a punitive success and value system too narrow to fit most of us comfortably” (McKenna 1997)
 - ... who long for “magical shift from being identified by her work to being just ‘who she was’” (McKenna 1997)
- ⇒ Pictures of modern women at work as in WDTOT can promote “opting out” into neo-traditional roles over (much needed) critical debate of work/life relationship for both women and men

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